



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## A LETTER TO THE PEOPLE

OF THE UNITED STATES UPON THEIR CONDUCT AS AN EMPLOYER.

---

DEAR PEOPLE : You are the largest employer of human labor in the United States. You are also the richest and the most conspicuous. I wish to remind you, therefore, that your behavior in the character of employer, besides affecting the happiness and stability of tens of thousands of American homes, has even still greater importance as an example to other employers. The list of your servants is so long, dear People, that I will not attempt to give even a summary of its contents in this place. Think only for a moment how many soldiers and sailors, how many clerks and book-keepers, how many mechanics, teachers, lawyers, clergymen, contractors, agents, engineers, experts, men of science, men of business, look to you for the money that rewards their labor and gives them their standing in the community. Including the noble army of teachers, among the most important of all your servants, you are now paying monthly wages to more than a million men and women. Dear People, this is a heavy weight of responsibility, which should cause you to consider with seriousness and patience whether you have been doing your duty of late years to so vast a number of dependent families. Whether those families are stable, virtuous, and happy, or whether they are unsafe, over-anxious, and demoralized, depends considerably upon you.

How you act, dear People, in your character as the employed, particularly when you deem yourselves unworthily or unjustly treated, all the world knows. You are, if I may be allowed to say so, a troublesome customer. If your wages are insufficient you make known your opinion on the subject in emphatic language, and sometimes in still more decided conduct. You frequently give utterance to remarks, and even emblazon them upon silken banners, so unreasonable and ridiculous, that nothing can excuse them

except the hardness of your lot, the bitterness of your feelings, and the difficulty of grasping all the facts involved. You sometimes go out on strike at the precise moment when it gives the greatest amount of inconvenience. You have been known to leave trains full of women and children on the track in the woods miles from their homes. You obstruct the streets with your processions, and make night hideous with noise and smoke. You stun the passer-by with thundering oratory. You buy and sustain newspapers conducted by professional workingmen of such inane stupidity and such savage temper as to excite in reflecting persons almost as much wrath for the conductors as compassion for you. There have been times, too, O People, when, under the sting of real or fancied wrong, you have committed outrages ; your conduct has been cruel and monstrous.

This I now say boldly to your face, because privately I have never had a word of censure for you. My sympathies have always been with you, even when my understanding has obliged me to conclude that you were in error. I know the universal hardness of the human lot. I concede, also, that if you had never protested with vehemence and resolution against the exactions of the employing class, your case to-day would be more deplorable than it was in the worst days of your fathers. People, I know what you have suffered in these and in former times in your character as the employed. Let me now ask you how you have behaved in your new character of employer. If I understand you aright, you desire from *your* employers these three things : Steady employment, just compensation, and human treatment. The question I propose to you is, Do you try to render these three when you are the master ?

First, as to reasonable steadiness of employment. I mean as steady and continuous as the nature of the work permits. You have probably not attentively considered what you do in holding over so many thousands of your employed the terror of the yellow envelope. Among the wrongs of which you complain you seldom experience just that particular kind of cruelty. It seldom happens to you to open a letter at breakfast-time from your foreman, informing you that, during the twenty-five years of service under his direction, you have performed your duties in the most exquisite and faultless manner, and that you are respectfully requested to resign your employment on the first of next month. Not many of

you, I say, know by experience what it is to be deprived suddenly and without cause of your whole revenue. Not many of you know what it is to live for months and years in daily dread of such a catastrophe. Not many of you know what it is to get up in the morning possessed of a modest income, upon which by long practice and habitual self-control you have learned how to support your family in decency and comfort, and to discover before the sun sets that that income has totally ceased. Ordinarily your employers know how to temper and soften such a stroke, and usually you yourselves know enough of the business in which you assist to foresee and parry it. Let me therefore tell you, as a mere piece of information, that when you suddenly and causelessly turn out of his place an elderly man fitted to it by long service, you are doing as cruel an action as an employer can do without violating the law. You are doing what an Irish landlord does when he evicts a good tenant because his crop has failed—an act which Mr. Gladstone assures us is nearly equivalent to a sentence of death. You are doing what you would do if you were to suddenly deprive Mr. Vanderbilt or Mr. Astor of all his property, and all his income from every source, with a notice to leave his domicile within thirty days. Perhaps you do not remember the fine saying of your friend, Benjamin Franklin, on this point, to the effect, that the All of one man is just as much to *him* as the All of any other man.

You will tell me, perhaps, that the office-holders knew this liability when they stooped to accept service from you on such sad and degrading conditions. Allow me to reply, dear People, that it is this very fact which heightens their torment and strengthens my case against you. A moment's reflection will show you that no honest man will accept an office on such a precarious condition unless compelled by bitter and stern necessity, which is another way of saying, unless he is a person of a certain incompetency. This system adopted in your name tends (observe, I only say, *tends*) to exclude from your service all but two classes, unprincipled men, and persons left out of the other callings. Of necessity, dear People, your service as now constituted must be chiefly composed of men who either have failed or would fail in business of their own. The people who serve you, if they are honest, would abandon your service to-morrow if they dared confront an independent career, and compete on equal terms for the

prizes of life. On fair conditions you might have in your employment the very pick of the whole population. You need them, for in many branches of your service there is required the best science, tried ability, and incorruptible character. You not only need men who can construct fleets and command armies, but men who can control the Mississippi system of rivers, manage cities, and administer an estate the most varied, productive, and magnificent upon which the sun looks down. You need the *élite* of the human race. You choose to take up with a class tending below the average, and then torment them with the subtle, all-pervading anguish of uncertainty as to their means of living—a kind of misery to which they of all men are most susceptible. If you had drawn into your service the admirable men of business and men of thought who abound in this country beyond all previous example, your treatment of them would be a matter of less importance. Take any of our legitimately successful men, not yet past their prime, put them down penniless and unknown in any part of the United States, and in thirty days he will have got himself into some path, the following of which will give him a desirable lot. You prefer, as it seems, to fill your offices with men and women who seek them and stay in them because they know they cannot make a desirable place for themselves, and these you keep in terror of dismissal.

What is the price, dear People, which alone will procure men of genuine ability? What is that prize which nearly all good men desire, which most good men seek, and which a considerable number of good men attain? My answer to this question, if I had to answer it in a phrase, would be, a career leading to honor and stable domestic happiness—a safe footing in the world, won by the fair exertion of our powers. You remember what Lamb said of the millionaire, that he was not content to escape poverty, but to place poverty at a sublime distance from him. We all want security as well as abundance, and this is the fundamental need of well-disposed men. It is the ceaseless quest of honorable security which keeps the world in motion. I have had the pleasure of knowing several persons eminently successful in the competitions of life, and I have often asked myself, “What are they after? Now that they have far more than enough, why do they still toil early and late, often putting all that they have gained to hazard?” Lamb has hit it in his happy, humorous way. They have built

the citadel of safety, but they wish now to buttress that citadel about with strengthening masses, and still to extend the defensive works, until Want, the gaunt enemy of human peace, cannot get within sight or sound of its occupant. If I may quote a living witness, I will repeat the remark of a New York capitalist when an interviewer congratulated him on the completion of the huge edifice in which he had invested sundry superfluous millions. He betrayed at once the real and only rational motive of such an enterprise by saying, as he looked at its vast proportions, "This is not a bad thing for a man to leave his children." One of the ablest capitalists that ever lived on this island, after accumulating six millions to be divided among his three children, employed several weeks, and all the resources of an acute mind, in framing a document, the object of which was to secure to his children in any conceivable contingency, and in spite of any possible mismanagement, a small but sufficient annual income. He left them all his other millions unconditionally to squander as they might, but this small portion, this citadel of safety in the midst of his estate, he defended with such elaborate ingenuity that no lawyer, no creditor, no son, has ever been able to break into it or get out of it. Such is the passion to compass the preliminary condition of human happiness—safety.

But, my dear People, all reasonable and sufficient safety you can bestow upon your faithful servants without putting them to the trouble of accumulation. The clerks, book-keepers, postmasters and lighthouse-keepers whom President Washington appointed, and whom President Jefferson continued in office, enjoyed this fundamental condition of peaceful and virtuous living as completely as if they had possessed a competent estate. Being reasonably secure, they could give themselves wholly up to the performance of their duty, and the rational enjoyment of their existence.

The strength of this passion for security is shown, dear People, by the very conduct of the unhappy men who are nominally your servants. The book-keeper of a private firm seeks security by rendering good service to his employers. He strives and expects to keep his place by making himself useful and agreeable, and we may lay it down as a rule, that a man will serve and obey the power that can remove him from his post. Do you possess that power over your servants, dear People? You ought to have it. It is your money that pays the office-holders. Do they then serve

*you?* You cannot be ignorant that the smartest of them most assiduously serve, obey, and court the power, the party, the senator, the boss, the clique, the gang, the caucus, which gave and can take away their places. I will not say they are right in doing so. I merely remark that they *will* do so, in every instance. It is the law and inevitable tendency of things.

Were those swarms of men whom Tweed appointed your servants or his? Dear People, you had the infamy of paying them. They plundered you, and obeyed him. They gave him millions, and made your chief city, with a site formed by nature to be the most attractive and pleasant capital of the earth, to be such a place that few live in it who can safely get away. On earth there is elsewhere no such combination of land and water, of river, inlet, and sea, of low land and high land; nowhere else such an opportunity for every kind of charm, convenience, and grandeur, as that of which Manhattan Island is the center. It was the business of your servants there to rise to the unequalled chance, and make New York peerless among cities. What have they done to it? Let the report of Mr. Wingate's tenement-house commission answer the question.

Permit me, dear People of the United States, to say a word also upon the wages you are paying those who have the pain of serving you. You possess a unique advantage over other employers in having a wages fund to draw from which is practically inexhaustible. In twenty years, besides paying an enormous army of employed persons with unfailing regularity, you have discharged two thousand millions of debt. You are the richest employer in the world, and therefore in fixing rates of compensation you need consider nothing except justice and propriety. The mere amount which you pay, if within the bounds of reason and right, is a matter of no moment to you at all. If at the beginning of the late war you could have hired a competent general at a million dollars a day, you could have paid the amount with ease, and saved a thousand millions through the bargain. You have but to ask yourself, in every instance, what is the sum of money per annum which will procure for me, in the long run, the ablest, purest, and steadiest service?

People, I will take the liberty of saying that you have not yet learned the rudiments of the art of paying. When your own compensation falls below the line of propriety and justice, good heav-

ens ! what an outcry is heard throughout the world. But when you are the paymaster, how do you comport yourself ? I admit that you pay money enough in sum total to compensate all your servants in the most liberal manner. Oh yes, my dear People, the sum total of your payments is truly respectable and altogether sufficient for the servants you can profitably employ. It is the distribution of the sum which is so erroneous. You are paying twelve hundred dollars a year to copyists, whom other employers get for half the amount ; while you pay to the score of lawyers whom you employ as chief judges, attorneys-general and Cabinet ministers little more than it costs them for house rent.

If any other client but you had to engage the pick of all the lawyers in the United States to go to a distant city for four years and devote himself exclusively to his client's business, with a month's vacation in summer, that client would have to pay that lawyer fifty thousand dollars per annum. He would find it to his advantage to pay that sum, with an occasional ten-thousand-dollar check by way of a refresher. On what ground can you expect to make a better bargain ? The time was, dear People, when the honor of serving you was the richest compensation which ambition could covet. That honor was the supreme object of desire to many of the ablest men of our species. Within my own recollection (and I am not yet as old as I hope to be) the office of assistant alderman in the city of New York was one of such distinction that some of the first merchants of the city desired and sought it. The first young men once counted it an eminent felicity to serve as secretary to the political association of a ward. It was better than yachting. This is all now sadly changed. During the last fifty-six years, ever since that baleful spring of 1829, it has become every year less and less an honor to serve you, and men of ability now find it more convenient to cajole you into choosing dummies for high place, and to rule through them. Your pitiful pay, therefore, is now nearly all that the men in most responsible positions can receive by way of compensation for their services. It used to be a few thousands, plus distinction, opportunity, honor, and lasting remembrance.

One hapless individual in your service, my People, has among his other duties that of entertaining for you and in your name the representatives of foreign governments resident among us. It is his pleasant office to invite them to breakfast, dinner, and tea, to



open his house to them generally, and give them what little comfort he can during their residence at a capital which does not abound in the agreeable things to which they are accustomed at home. He has to be a father and friend to them all, and whatever he does in this way he does for you. As a citizen, Mr. Seward, or Mr. Bayard, or Mr. Frelinghuysen, is no more bound to ask a foreign minister to dinner than any other citizen. He does it wholly as your representative, and it is you who get the credit of it. People, when you invite a friend to tea you put before him the most luxurious spread which you can coax out of your refrigerator. Pork and beans may be your ordinary fare, but in honor of your friend and your house and the sacred rite of hospitality, you are content on this occasion with nothing short of chicken fixings and cranberry sauce. Rather than fail as a host you will spend half a week's wages on the feast, and subsist the rest of the week on the leavings. Do you ever pass around the hat among friends on the plea that you are going to entertain company and want to do the thing in style? But that is just what you do, O People, when you perform the duty of national hospitality through one of your servants. With infinite difficulty you get a man to serve who has plenty of money in the bank; to pay him his house rent, and let him meet the cost of entertaining your company out of his private fortune. Mr. Seward was a plain man, perfectly free from the spirit of ostentation. He lived at Washington in an ugly, old-fashioned, and not large brick house. He gave a diplomatic dinner every Saturday during the winter, and a reception in the evening. His salary averaged (in gold) about four thousand dollars a year, and I heard him mention that his expenses in Washington during his eight years of service as Secretary of State came to about twenty-two thousand dollars a year, in paper; say, about sixteen thousand in gold. Do not reply that he might have lived in a flat, and given your guests an oyster stew with cold slaw and crackers. Such a remark is frequently made in your name; but, People, it is beneath your intelligence. Politicians who talk so misrepresent your feelings.

I am far from thinking that you begrudge fair compensation to any who serve you, whether of low or high degree. The erroneous system of payment has grown in part out of circumstances, but is chiefly due to the lack of a guiding principle, which perhaps might have been indicated in the Constitution itself. I beg to propose

for your consideration the simple and just rule which has always guided you in your private transactions, *the rule of the market price*. I mean that, as you buy every commodity at the price which other buyers pay, so you shall pay every grade of man what individuals and corporations have to pay for the same grade. In New York, for example, there are at least ten grades of book-keepers, and they are paid from five hundred to fifteen thousand dollars per annum. Do the same, my dear People, in your public business. At Washington and elsewhere, there are a few collectors, heads of bureaus and others, who ought to be men of business of the very first class, men who could, in private enterprises, become rich in a few years. Pay such men in honor and in safety the equivalent of a large capital ; thus, as our President has happily stated it, putting the public service on a business footing.

Finally, my dear People, you must learn how to treat your servants with politeness and consideration. If you are compelled to deprive a good man of his accustomed employment, you must learn to mitigate the stroke by the devices and allowances which the comity of private business has evolved. Do you suppose, People, that if the Chemical Bank or the Cooper Glue Works had a few clerks too many, that the manager would dismiss them ruthlessly and rudely, with no notice, without allowing reasonable opportunities to seek other employment ? Do you suppose that any respectable and rooted establishment would turn an old man out of his place, like an old horse, to die on the high road ? You know it would not. Why should you, the sovereign People of the United States, be less considerate, less humane, less polite than a bank ? Why should you incur the shame of those heartless, brutal jokes of the newspapers, based upon the harrowing anxieties of aged clerks, whose calamity is that they have served you for a great many years ? Is it a jest, or is it the fifth act of a tragedy, for an old man to be suddenly bereft of the only employment by which it is possible for him to subsist in honor and peace ? Whatever they may suffer, it is you, the People of the United States, who are dishonored. Beat all the yachts that sail on the sea, you will have the respect of no worthy community on the globe while you treat old servants so. I can recall but one instance in which you behaved to discharged clerks with an approximation to decency. It was when General B. F. Butler procured the passage of an act giving two months'

pay to five hundred poor fellows, to enable them to get out of Washington.

For many years past it has been with me an object of curiosity to ascertain the true causes of durable success in human affairs. I have discovered nothing which has endured long except through taking due and ample care of its agents and ministers—not merely in the heyday of their strength, but when through infirmity and age they have ceased to be interesting, and lost their efficiency. *You* turn such out to die! The institutions that endure put upon their breast the splendid star of promotion, or hide their lean, shrunk shanks with the superb mantle of a new dignity. The Catholic Church is strong because it offers to all who serve it, of every degree, a desirable lot as long as life endures. The Protestant system dissolves visibly before our eyes because it has no desirable places except for the gifted, the brilliant, and the young. The London “*Times*” is to-day the first journal of Europe, because its founder knew how to treat men, both during and after their period of efficiency. I frequently hear you, O People, utter disparagingly the name of Vanderbilt. I could not ask anything better of you than that you should treat the men who serve you on the precise principle which guided the late commodore in his treatment of the men who worked for him. Before handing over his steamship to the government, he made it a condition that the officers and men should not be paid government wages, and he put this demand on the right ground. “I want my ship,” said he, “to be sailed in the best way, by the best men, and the best men can’t be got at the wages the government is paying.” Enough; I could adduce the whole history of man, public and private, in support of the commodore’s principle. If I could believe that your present childish system of appointments and removals were a thing of necessity in republics, I should be obliged to conclude that republican institutions, not being in harmony with the unchangeable circumstances of human life, ought not to endure.

Do not cherish the delusion that this barbarism is democratic. It is the precise thing which is farthest removed from every good meaning of that word. It is the system of favoritism, accident, and corruption. It gives every man a chance at public employment except the man who ought to have it. The most debauched hereditary despot never appointed and never removed with anything approaching your reckless and cruel precipitation. It recalls

to mind those periods in the decay of nations when mercenary favorites and volatile mistresses ruled and ruined. It savors of the time when Madame Dubarry gave Talleyrand a bishopric for an indecent jest.

I remain, my dear People, as I have ever been,

Yours truly,

JAMES PARTON.